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Statement submitted by Forum for Women and Development, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights — a moral imperative

In the whole range of cultures across the globe, there is ambivalence towards adolescents' sexuality. This is reflected in hesitation in respecting, protecting and fulfilling their sexual and reproductive human rights. Young people pay a high price for this, with unnecessary stress and unhappiness, with ill-health and even with death. Sexual and reproductive choices and experiences at a young age have lifetime consequences.

With our collective knowledge, we are now better equipped than ever before. There is a lot of solid evidence on what promotes adolescents' health and reduces risks. Making comparisons between the diverse situations in the world informs us about what promotes and what hinders good health. Assessments of the effects of societal changes in one area can be important lessons learned for others. Solid information is all the more important in areas that are as deeply entrenched in our cultures as societies, and psychologically for us as individuals. Families, which are of such central importance and where children and young people get their support and also learn to discipline their emotions, vary over a wide range. The extent to which young people are encouraged to take individual decisions and trust their own judgement, on the one hand, and to respect parents and other guardians, on the other, vary greatly. Religions, so important in individuals' existential concerns, which should be respected, are widely misused in power games that young people in particular pay a high price for. Real life can be very different from what religions and societies prescribe. Policies that are not built on real people's real lives become inhumane.

In diverse cultures, there is also a huge variation in the way in which we perceive sexuality: whether it is only a private matter, or whether it also is a matter that should be dealt with by society at large, through laws and legislation and in education in schools, and to what extent health care should be involved. Therefore, our discussions should be mindful of these differences, but at the same time brave enough to challenge the obstacles that we are facing. It is unjust, immoral and inhumane that adolescents pay a high price for lack of effective action.

We now know that quality sexuality education gives youngsters tools for a better life and more responsible decision-making in intimate relations. Such education should be based on the needs of children and adolescents, and should not be censored by parents or guardians. Parents have a vital role to play in terms of bringing up their children. But intimate issues are often better dealt with either by a more distant relative, by a sensitive teacher, by health personnel or by peers. Offspring can have difficulties realizing that parents have sex, and parents can find it hard to face the fact that their children are sexually active. If policies, then, are based more on lofty ideals than on real life, young people are deprived of their right to protect themselves against risks and harm, and fear replaces pleasure. Abstinence unquestionably has a very high failure rate.

Basing policies on real lives is a value, and it is the value that the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development is based on. The right to necessary health care for adolescents can be realized only if such health care is confidential and respectful.

Accessibility includes financial accessibility. Young people have little access to money. It is therefore of vital importance that health system financing take into account the fact that reproductive health services to adolescents should be free of charge, and that individual health workers implement schemes that exempt young people from paying user fees. Even in rich countries, free services, including contraceptives free of charge, has been shown to make a big difference in terms of the use of services and in terms of health outcomes.

Protection against sexually transmitted infections is of special concern for young people. In a lifetime perspective, co-infections with a conventional sexually transmitted infection and HIV affect girls disproportionally. Access to contraception, preferably with dual protection against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, is of special importance to adolescents, in terms of their lifetime perspective. In order to live happy, healthy and productive lives, they need to be able to control their fertility and to protect themselves against sexually transmitted infections, which can have consequences for their entire lives.

Induced abortion is maybe the most contentious issue within reproductive health. Again, knowledge should be our resort, and policies should be based on evidence rather than on myths. We know that most unwanted pregnancies are terminated, regardless of whether it is safe or not, and regardless of whether it is legal or not and therefore whether or not it has societal approval. Young girls are less often able than older women to realize that they are pregnant early in the pregnancy, and late abortions are more risky than early ones. Moreover, young girls are less able to access funds for a safe abortion, or even for treatment of abortion complications. Unsafe abortion is therefore a special concern for young girls. Laws and policies should be based on what is known to give the best outcome in terms of life and health. A real, honest pro-life stand would be to trust girls and women to be moral agents able to take ethically based decisions, and to have health services that support and respect these decisions and give them the necessary services, including safe, legal abortions. This approach has now been proved to protect the health and save the lives of women. And access to safe, legal abortions actually decreases the resort to abortion when combined with access to contraception, including emergency contraception.

Early marriage, which forces girl children out of school and leads to early sexual debut and often pressure to produce children before they are bodily and emotionally mature, is a global scandal. Legislation, combined with policies that enable families to sustain daughters, keep them in school and protect them against early marriage and other harmful traditional practices, is urgently required.

The gender dimensions of reproductive health are overwhelming. Fertility has such a crucial value in all societies, and women's bodies have the capability of carrying new lives. But this capability should not be used as a reason to oppress and control women. The empowerment of girls and women, the responsible and active support of boys and men, and mutual support and respect are prerequisites for caring, non-violent relationships and for good sexual health. Special attention should be given to sexual and gender diversity, and to addressing homophobia and other expressions of rigid, violent versions of masculinities that leave both women and many men vulnerable and discriminated against.

Knowledge and values should be the basis for policies. There is a lot of support for reproductive health at the top level globally, manifested in Millennium Development Goal 5; also among heads of State there is a lot of support. In addition, there is an urgent need to have political will at the local level, where so many important decisions are made in terms of prioritization in health care, education and family concerns. Such political struggles need to take into account the local situations and the best strategic approaches to delicate but extremely important issues. The high number of adolescents today is in itself a reason for urgent action. The potential as well as the vulnerabilities of adolescents need to be acknowledged, and the future of sexual and reproductive health and rights needs to be shaped with the full involvement of young people.